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Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 11 July 1997, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. HENZE (Germany)
(Vice-President)

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In the absence of Mr. Galuska (Czech Republic), Mr. Henze (Germany), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

COORDINATION OF THE POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIALIZED AGENCIES AND OTHER BODIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATED TO THE FOLLOWING THEMES:

(b) FRESHWATER, INCLUDING CLEAN AND SAFE WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION (agenda item 4 (b)) (continued) (E/1997/70)

Mr. ITO (Japan) said that the issue of freshwater should be dealt with in a holistic and comprehensive manner, which required close cooperation and coordination among Governments and the international and regional organizations concerned. His delegation expressed its appreciation of the Secretary-General's report (E/1997/70) and commended the efforts by the United Nations system tc achieve closer coordination of its activities, which included the establishment of the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). He hoped that coordination would be further strengthened and referred in that connection to the activities of the World Bank, which was doing important work in the field.

His Government attached great importance to the issue of water and had provided economic assistance to countries throughout the world for the creation of water and sewage systems. As a follow-up to the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in 1993, it had provided 35.4 billion yen in grant assistance for underground water development and water-supply projects in Africa from the fiscal year 1993 to 1996 inclusive.

Addressing the General Assembly at its recent special session, Prime Minister Hashimoto had referred to the issue of water as one of the pillars of the plan of action to be implemented under his Initiatives for Sustainable Development toward the Twenty-first Century (ISD). At the international level, the International Environmental Technology Centre of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) had carried out a number of useful studies and workshops to promote the transfer of environmentally sound technologies for the sustainable development of large cities and freshwater lakes and reservoirs.

His delegation intended to participate actively in the discussions of the Commission on Sustainable Development, whose sectoral theme for 1998 would

be "Strategic approaches to freshwater management", and would continue its efforts to provide clean and safe water for all the peoples of the world through its economic cooperation.

Mr. VAHER (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) said that a freshwater crisis had been predicted ever since the United Nations Water Conference 20 years previously, but the imminent danger of the freshwater shortage had only recently become widely appreciated. At its nineteenth special session, the General Assembly had identified freshwater as one of the top priorities for the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development. The report on the Comprehensive Assessment of the Freshwater Resources of the World (E/CN.17/1997/9) was to be commended for providing a comprehensive and reliable basis on which to build international consensus.

As that report highlighted, freshwater resources were very unevenly distributed around the globe, and many regions faced serious water scarcity. Yet the freshwater issue was in many cases more of a management question. Areas with comparatively abundant water resources had been experiencing severe shortage, while other less fortunate places had managed quite well. It was therefore important to orient international assistance to building national and local capacity in water-resources management.

The manifestations of the problem at the community level should not be overlooked either. The rural and urban poor were the first to be affected by shortages, lack of access or contamination. The community focus of UNICEF-supported water and sanitation programmes would therefore continue, but with an increasing emphasis on building the community's capacity in water-resources management.

Africa was the continent most heavily affected by the water crisis. Water shortages would no doubt accelerate desertification, which was already a major problem for the sub-Saharan countries. Africa was by far the lowest user of water resources and, if the situation remained unchanged to the year 2000, 60 per cent of the world's population without access to safe drinking water would be in Africa. Water-related initiatives should therefore give Africa the highest priority in terms of financial and technical support.

In a shift from its traditional focus on the supply of drinking water in support of child survival, protection and development, UNICEF was paying increased attention to community-based management of the water environment

within the context of Agenda 21 and Primary Environmental Care (PEC), and linking water supply with sanitation and hygiene. As highlighted in the assessment report, the question of access to water supply should not be addressed separately from the issue of water quality. Water-related diseases resulted in some 25 million deaths every year. Water pollution prevention, water conservation, drinking water supply and provision of sanitation and hygiene education must be considered in an integrated manner in the planning of development assistance.

In that context, partnerships became an even more crucial factor. At the May 1997 meeting of the Joint Committee on Health Policy, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF had agreed on a joint Water Supply and Environmental Sanitation Strategy within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the World Summit for Children and the policy of Health for All by the year 2000. UNICEF and the United Nations Department for Development, Support and Management Services would together be organizing World Day for Water in March 1998, the theme of which would be "Groundwater, invisible resource".

He had been encouraged to hear many national leaders refer to water as a major issue at the special session of the General Assembly, which challenged the United Nations family to respond appropriately. Several mechanisms had already been established, including the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa, the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and the Global Water Partnership. Those mechanisms needed to work together to produce concrete results in the short term.

Any programme of action must have realistic, concrete, clearly-defined, measurable and achievable objectives which took account of regional disparities and capacities as well as differences between urban and rural settings. Such a programme must also give the highest priority to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene education. UNICEF also favoured an approach that did not place unrealistic burdens on the poorest people, who already paid much more than the others for water supplies.

Mr. DINDUNS (Latvia), having expressed his delegation's support for the statement by the spokesman for the European Union, said that freshwater-related issues had been on the agenda of United Nations bodies

for 25 years. Although the Mar del Plata Action Plan and chapter 18 of Agenda 21 provided the basic framework for United Nations activities, the General Assembly had found at its recent special session that there was much room for improvement of regional and global strategic approaches to the issue.

The situation in Latvia was similar to that of other countries with economies in transition and did not meet the requirements of the assessment report. Most of Latvia's problems were a result of the previous approach to water management, which had ignored the problems of limited water resources and pollution of freshwater basins. Particular problems were eutrophication related to overuse of fertilizers in agriculture, uncontrolled industrial pollution and inappropriate use of clean drinkable water for purposes where lower quality water was sufficient.

A great concern of his Government was the potential risk of contamination left by former Soviet troops, in particular the threat posed by chemical weapons dumped after the Second World War in the Baltic Sea just off the coast. The Baltic Sea Council had expanded its scope of activities to include the Baltic Sea freshwater basin.

Sustainable use of water resources, including a safe drinking water supply, recycling and proper waste-water treatment, played the most important role in careful exploitation of global freshwater resources. Despite its difficult financial situation, his Government was introducing new local waste-water treatment facilities and proper household and industrial water disposal with secondary waste-water treatment.

Mr. CABACTULAN (Philippines), having endorsed the statement by the spokesman for the Group of 77, said that several major United Nations conferences had already devoted a significant portion of their deliberations to freshwater, leading to a consensus for a holistic management of freshwater. The Council's task was to ensure the synergy and coherence of United Nations operational activities in the field. In that regard, his delegation had the following suggestions to make: at the international level, the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources should emphasize its function of formulating common strategies and joint programmes, should avoid duplication of activities and should ensure that the strengths and capacities of the various bodies of the system were fully harnessed; concerned organizations of the system, including the regional commissions, should be encouraged to cooperate fully

with the Subcommittee; a global information network should be established as soon as possible, taking full advantage of recent advances in information technology; and cooperative arrangements with non-United Nations global initiatives like the Global Water Partnership (GWP) should be encouraged.

At the country level, the development plans and priorities of developing countries should provide a unifying framework for United Nations operational activities on freshwater; the resident coordinator system should be fully utilized; and, where applicable, instruments such as the Common Assessment, Country Strategy Note (CSN), the field committees and the thematic groups should be employed to ensure the effective impact of United Nations technical cooperation assistance in matters related to freshwater; and assistance to developing countries should focus on capacity-building and the transfer of technology.

Ms. TOLLE (Kenya), having endorsed the statement by the spokesman for the Group of 77, said that the sustainable availability and supply of freshwater continued to assume importance against a background of problems arising largely from poor resource management, wasteful and inefficient use of water, unregulated disposal of effluents and weak institutional frameworks. Over three billion people in developing countries, including a growing number of town dwellers, were without access to adequate sanitation, and there was a critical demand for a sufficient supply of drinking water. There was thus an urgent need for the Council and its subsidiary bodies to take the lead in formulating and providing policy and guidance in the field of water resources, giving the highest priority to implementing chapter 18 of Agenda 21.

At the national level, her Government's lead agency responsible for water-resources management was the Ministry of Land Reclamation, Regional and Water Development, whose activities she described. The Government had identified certain water catchment areas as "conservation zones", was actively involved in the development of effluent discharge guidelines, had formulated environmental impact assessment procedures for water-resources management and was formulating a policy on wetlands management.

At the subregional level, the Japanese Government had funded an FAO-executed East African regional project on planning and sustainable management of water and other related environmental resources within the Lake Victoria basin, and the World Bank and the Global Environment

Facility (GEF) had provided funding for the Lake Victoria Environment Management Programme, a multisectoral regional project to be implemented by Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

At the global level, implementation of chapter 18 required a proven commitment by the international community to provide additional financial resources to facilitate the efforts of developing countries in a number of areas which she enumerated. There was a need for concerted approaches which could be achieved only through a coordinated effort and cooperation at both the national and international levels. The United Nations system must maintain its capacity to support national efforts to develop sustainable water strategies that addressed basic human needs and preserved the ecosystem. All those issues could appropriately be taken up by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its forthcoming session.

Mr. PETROV (Russian Federation) said, with reference to the deteriorating quality and safety of the water-supply system in his country, that the freshwater issue was of distinct relevance to countries not experiencing an acute shortage of water resources. There was a need for a coordinated approach to water-resources development and management within the United Nations system, especially since the urgency of the problem had been highlighted by the General Assembly at its nineteenth special session. His delegation was thus ready to participate in formulating a strategy for the sustainable development of water resources within the framework of the Commission on Sustainable Development, with the aim of ensuring a clean and safe water supply and sanitation for all and supported the General Assembly's recommendation that a global network on water-resources development and related issues be established.

The ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources should work with other relevant bodies to ensure that the dialogue would be a constructive one and that additional financial resources were mobilized. Focusing on country-level activities, it must seek to coordinate the water-related activities of the United Nations system and to strengthen regional cooperation. Water use and management could not be divorced from issues such as land use, desertification, biodiversity and climate change and there was, consequently, a need for close contact with the environmental agencies.

Ms. AQUILINA (Observer for Malta), having welcomed the Secretary-General's report (E/1997/70) and the Council's decision to focus on the important issue of freshwater resources, said that a large proportion of her country's water supply was obtained through reversed osmosis and the desalination of sea water, since freshwater supplies were insufficient to meet the population's needs. Her delegation supported the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development, in the context of chapter 18 of Agenda 21, and the important efforts of other bodies such as the Committee on Natural Resources and the ACC Subcommittee. Since the issue was of importance to many countries, closer coordination on water-resource issues should be made a top priority.

Mr. DAKA (Zambia), having endorsed the Secretary-General's report (E/1997/70) and the views expressed by the spokesman for the Group of 77, said that freshwater, including a clean and safe water supply for the domestic and industrial sectors and sanitation, constituted a basic component of the overall efforts to achieve sustainable development. Due to their very limited financial and technical capacity to process and supply safe water, the issue was particularly critical for the least developed countries (LDCs). The enormous efforts already being made in many developing countries required the financial and technical support of the international community, including the United Nations.

In his country, there was still room for improvement, especially in the rural areas, where safe water-supply coverage ranged from 10 to 30 per cent. Per capita water consumption was very low, being between 15 and 20 litres. Sustainability of the service was still a major problem, since maintenance costs increased with time. Only 1.2 per cent of rural households had piped water as compared with 26.9 per cent of urban households, while a mere 1.6 per cent of rural households possessed flushing toilets, as compared with 42 per cent of urban households.

In many developing countries, including his own, it was the women who were most affected by problems pertaining to clean water supply and sanitation, since they were traditionally the primary haulers and users of water. Lack of access to safe water meant increased disease in families, while women and children had to walk long distances in search of water. His

Government had adopted a national water policy in 1994. It was designed to increase coverage and improve service and notable progress had been made with help from Norway, Germany, Ireland and Japan.

Despite the commendable efforts made by ACC, there was a need for a clearer delineation of responsibilities among the Council's various subsidiary bodies to ensure system-wide coordination between policy-making and field operations and it was to be hoped that the world water council would soon be established to facilitate such coordination.

Ms. KUNADI (India), having endorsed the statement by the spokesman for the Group of 77, said that her Government attached the highest importance to freshwater issues. Despite significant efforts, particularly at the country level, it was a matter of deep concern that more than 1 billion people did not have access to safe drinking water and almost 3 billion lacked adequate sanitation. The challenge of extending drinking-water and sanitation coverage was thus an urgent one, both for the developing countries and the international community as a whole. Freshwater was crucial for developing countries, which sought to satisfy the basic needs of their populations in sectors where water was a key factor, such as agriculture, irrigation, industrial development and the generation of hydroelectricity.

An effective international partnership was needed to help the developing countries overcome their lack of an adequate infrastructure and technical and financial constraints. International cooperation to promote sustainable use of water resources must remain flexible and build on existing principles, instruments and programmes of action, since bilateral, subregional and other mechanisms were already in place in many regions. To that end, as had been agreed by the General Assembly at its recent special session, the international community must commit itself to new and additional financial resources to ensure that intergovernmental dialogue was translated into action.

Mr. ACEMAH (Uganda), having endorsed the statement by the spokesman for the Group of 77, commended the Secretary-General on his report (E/1997/70), and emphasized the importance of freshwater utilization, management, conservation and development, said that his country was blessed with abundant freshwater resources, which covered approximately one fifth of its surface. The international community must accord the highest priority to

the serious freshwater problems facing many regions, particularly in the developing world. Consensus must be reached on actions to ensure the sustainable use of freshwater resources for social and economic purposes and to find a long-term solution to the looming water crisis which posed a potential threat to regional and international peace and security.

There must be a holistic, integrated and well-coordinated approach to water-resources development and management within an agreed set or priorities. All actions must be based on the universally accepted standards and principles of international law, on the sovereign right of States to exploit their own natural resources and on the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization of such resources.

It was to be regretted, therefore, that the report of the Commission on Sustainable Development (A/S-19/14) failed to refer to those principles, employing ambiguous concepts such as "customary uses of water" (para. 29) on which no consensus had been reached in the context of Agenda 21. It thus appeared to pre-empt the outcome of any future dialogue in favour of certain categories of water uses or users. Such concepts, which were not acceptable to his Government, did not represent a viable basis for the future work of the Commission on Sustainable Development or work in any other forum, particularly with respect to transboundary resources.

Ms. SZOLLOSI-NAGY (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)), speaking as secretary of the UNESCO International Hydrological Programme (IHP), said that IHP was the only fully-fledged intergovernmental programme within the United Nations system to be devoted to the science of hydrology and water resources in general, as well as to the transfer of knowledge gained in those fields to all levels of society.

It was a well-established fact that water problems had reached a critical level and that the temporal and spatial variability of freshwater resources was very sensitive to possible climate changes such as global warming. The assumption was that the frequency of extreme hydrological events such as floods and droughts would increase. It was crucial to improve the understanding of global hydrology in the climate mechanism, since it was one of the least understood components of global change.

The top priority of IHP was the issue of groundwater resources at risk, since they constituted an important component of human water supplies. The Programme aimed at improving vulnerability assessment methodologies to assist countries with early warning of possible water-supply contamination by urban development, industrial pollution and agricultural practices. It also sought to develop management tools to mitigate salt-water intrusion into coastal groundwater systems, which was often induced by high population density in coastal regions.

Since water was a potential source of conflict, IHP was developing negotiation support methodologies for water-related emergency management and conflict-resolution strategies through "Water for peace" demonstration case-studies. With a view to quantifying the vulnerability of the environment, a methodological framework was being developed for comprehensive environmental risk and impact assessment. The Comprehensive Assessment of the Freshwater Resources of the World had revealed that nearly half the world's countries would face severe water shortages in the next century, resulting in possible conflicts over shared water resources. UNESCO was to sponsor, in that connection, an international conference on world water resources in 1998.

IHP was developing methodologies for the sustainable management of water resources in arid and semi-arid areas through integrated approaches, including a wadi hydrology project in the Arab region. Particular attention would also be paid to fossil groundwater systems in sub-Saharan Africa where studies were to be initiated in cooperation with the countries sharing aquifer systems in western Africa. IHP was also helping to improve water-resources management in the humid tropics, as well as mechanisms for integrated urban water management in various climatic zones.

The Programme was also seeking to improve the transfer of knowledge of the hydrological and engineering sciences through public awareness-raising projects, and to further skills for solving complex water-resources problems, especially amongst women in the sub-Saharan countries.

Ms. WALLER HUNTER (Director, Division for Sustainable Development) having thanked the Council for its positive response to the Secretary-General's report (E/1997/70) and for its support for the

ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources, said that the Commission on Sustainable Development had recently agreed on the need to facilitate country-level coordination on sustainable development, including water-resources development. That was in line with the call by many speakers for greater focus on country-level coordination.

The meeting rose at 4.15 p.m.